

# CHAIRPERSON'S INTRODUCTION

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Use of a habitat means different things to different "users". In some countries there are those for whom a shallow coastal coral reef is of more use as a landing site for a heavy military vehicle. In Australia the same reef might be regarded as an ideal site to dredge a stable speedboat harbour or build a canal estate. There would be others who would consider the best use of the reef to leave it as it is.

The Australian public (and media) are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of our inland waterways and "Injured Coastline". However, both fisheries scientists and the public are still desperately short of hard information about the role of particular habitats in sustaining both fish populations and other living resources. For example, an interviewer recently asked me whether the destruction of any particular mangrove stand near Coffs Harbour could explain the disappearance of younger age classes of gemfish from the winter spawning run.

When conflicts between users of a common resource occur in Australia they are handled in various ways, including publicity campaigns, Resource Assessment Commission Inquiries, legal challenges and civil disobedience. All too often the conflicts are treated with confusion, apathy and political procrastination. Although the complex jurisdictional arrangements can exacerbate the situation, biologists are frequently unable to provide the information called for by resource economists in evaluating particular conflicts.

Analysts often maintain different world views. Economists sometimes regard the universe as an economic system within which ecology is one component, many others regard economics as one component of our ecosystem, and a third group regard economics and ecology as separate dimensions within our human niche.

From a fish biologist's standpoint the large problems are:

- defining the environmental impact caused by, or likely to be caused by, an alternative use;
- recommending options for controlling the degree of the impact (or effect);
- developing precise and comprehensible (not necessarily quantitative) assessments of the risks associated with alternative uses.

Outside the usual brief for fish biologists lie the realms of bioeconomic risk assessment, resource pricing and establishing the full range of alternative reasons that people may want to use fish habitats. Yet the community expects fish biologists to provide a sound input to analyses in these other areas.

Fish biologists should aim to have an effective input to both the policy making process and the use of scientific results in decision making concerned with regulating the use of fish habitats by a broad spectrum of users. Our panel speakers will spark debate on these broad issues and the approaches that fish biologists could take to achieve this aim.